

## Research Article

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# The Influence of Mother Wisdom on Augustine

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**Abstract:** The Book of Ben Sira was popular in the early Christian church and influenced the Church Father Augustine (354–430). He adopts the person of Wisdom as a divine mother and adapts her within the context of the early Christian church. He links to Mother Wisdom a wisdom theology, in which Jesus is her envoy. Augustine describes Mother Wisdom as an eternal nourishing divine mother. She has a permanent revelatory status by continuously giving life-giving power, which she mediates through Jesus of Nazareth. He presents her grace which she has prepared for the *competentes* (the candidates for Baptism), who are working towards initiation into Christian Faith. Mother Wisdom serves as hostess in biblical Wisdom literature. For Augustine, Jesus Christ has taken this place. Mother Wisdom serves instead the angels and the spiritual persons as a representative of divine nourishment.

**Keywords:** Book of Ben Sira, Mother Wisdom, *Mater Sapientia*, Augustine, Christology

## 1 Introduction

When motherhood is considered in the Bible today, accounts usually soon turn to examples of mothers such as Eve, Hagar and Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, Mary and Elizabeth. When exploring the concept of divine motherhood in the Bible, many are not familiar with it. After all, we were brought up with a male image of God, which has dominated the Christian religious experience for centuries. This, however, is too one-sided. The concept of Wisdom is the best place to start in the consideration of divine motherhood in biblical wisdom literature. She has a prominent place as a woman and mother in this literature. In Hebrew she is Chokmah (חָכְמָה), in Greek: *Sophia* (σοφία) and in Latin: *Sapientia*. Most people assume that wisdom indicates insight, the art of living and practical knowledge, but Wisdom is also personified as a female person. Wisdom is a teacher who teaches us wisdom of life. She is also a hostess who invites us to her meals. She comes to the fore in Proverbs 8:1–9, 9:1–12; Job 28, Baruch 3:9–4:4; in Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–10:21 and Wisdom of Jesus Sirach 24. This wisdom tradition was still current at the time of the life of Jesus. Traces of this wisdom tradition can be found in texts of the First Testament and the Second Testament and also in Augustine (354–430).

Wisdom comes to the fore as a mother in the Book of Ben Sira:

I am the mother of awe and true love of knowledge and holy hope. I was given forever to all my children, to all who have chosen the Lord (Sir. 24:18).

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The Greek text of the Book of Ben Sira functioned as a sacred text within the early Christian churches. The Greek text was also translated into Latin, Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, Armenian and Arabic.<sup>1</sup> As a result, it was circulated widely in the early Christian church. The Latin translation circulated as early as the second century CE in North Africa.<sup>2</sup> The popularity of the book in early Christianity can also be seen in its nickname, *Ecclesiasticus*, a term which meant “church book.” *Ecclesiasticus* was especially used in the early Christian church to teach catechumens.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that Augustine came into contact with this book in this way since he was a catechumen in the Catholic Church for many years, and as a bishop, he was also responsible for teaching catechumens. Regardless, it is obvious that he knew this work and that he may have impacted his own approach to representing Wisdom as a mother, especially in Tractate 98 on the Gospel of John. This tractate is about the teaching of the faith in the early Christian church.

In this article, I will investigate how Augustine’s own approach to Wisdom may have been impacted by Ben Sira. To what extent Augustine did adopt and adapt the imagery of Ben Sira? In what context he did place Mother Wisdom and what function he did give her?

## 2 Theoretical framework and methodology

For Augustine, the Bible was the fundamental source for both his life and his work; he showered his texts with biblical quotations. However, the biblical references in modern editions of Augustine’s works do not come from Augustine himself, but rather from later editors of his works. In his day, the Bible had yet to receive divisions into chapters and verse enumeration. Usually, he worked with the *Vetus Latina*, a collective name for ancient translations of the Greek text of the Bible into Latin, and gradually he made more room for the Vulgate that was created between 390 and 405.<sup>4</sup>

In Augustine, we find an intertwining between his texts and the Bible. Therefore, in this contribution about the influence of Mother Wisdom in Augustine’s writings, I will use an intertextual approach which studies the connections between texts containing a biblical quotation and the Bible text from which it originated. This approach searches for the similarities and differences at the level of both individual words and larger sentences. When Augustine quoted biblical texts, words were often omitted or changed to adopt the passage to its new setting. Therefore, we may deduce Augustine’s overall intention in his writings by comparing the interplay between the biblical quotation and Augustine’s overall text, allowing his perceived intentions to emerge.

Augustine transferred the motherly imagery of Ben Sira to the context of the early Christian church. In the days of Augustine, Christianity had become an official religion through imperial recognition and the church was given a privileged position that allowed it to reach many people and imbue society with Christian values. During this time the content of the Christian faith was being formed. We come across the consequential discussions in the polemics that Augustine had with his opponents. In the tractate of this contribution (Io.eu.tr. 98) he is in discussion with the Manicheans.

This research is localized in the scientific field of spirituality. Based on the definitions of Dreyer and Burrows,<sup>5</sup> and Waaijman,<sup>6</sup> I identify four aspects of spirituality: (1) the divine reality: the triune God, (2) the human reality: the disciple, (3) the human and divine realities as related reciprocally: discipleship and

1 Harrington, “Wisdom of Jesus Sirach.”

2 Beentjes, *De Wijshheid van Jesus Sirach*, 124.

3 Ibid., 59–60.

4 Dulaey, “Hoe Augustinus de Bijbel leest,” 108.

5 Dreyer and Burrows ascribe Christian spirituality: “A particular Christian spirituality is one that involves conscious discipleship, opening oneself to the grace in the generosity of the Creator, through the love of God, by the grace of Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Spirit.” Dreyer and Burrows, *Minding the Spirit*, xv.

6 Waaijman defines spirituality as “divine-human relational process.” Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 427.

(4) the relation as dynamic, as a process. The relation between the divine reality and the human reality can be mediated by a person.

My research questions are focused on the following: In what way does Mother Wisdom reveals herself? In what way did Augustine express her function? What experience does her revelation bring to the disciple? What happens between Mother Wisdom and the disciple?

This investigation involves (at least) two actors: Mother Wisdom and the *competentes* (the candidates for Baptism). When there is mediation, it can involve another actor in the person of Jesus Christ on earth.

This study follows an hermeneutical approach, because it is based on a text of Augustine; this research is also systematic for its analysis of the indication of divine motherhood, and historical because of its research into the context in which Augustine placed Mother Wisdom. In carrying out the hermeneutic research, I am referring to the central passage in which Mother Wisdom comes to the fore (Io.eu.tr. 98, 6).

## 3 Mother Wisdom in Augustine

### 3.1 Introduction

In this section, I will discuss a text of Augustine from his tractates on the Gospel of John (*In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*). The genre of the tractates can be understood as an exegetical sermon, in which Augustine comments on a Bible text verse by verse. The central text in this section comes from Tractate 98, which he wrote between 418 and 420. Augustine explains here a Paraclete text in which Jesus makes known to his disciples that he still has a lot to say, but that they cannot bear it yet (John 16:12–3). After his passing away, Jesus will send the Spirit of truth to his disciples, who will instruct them.

In this tractate, Augustine deals with the teaching of the Faith in the early Christian church. As bishop he was responsible for the formation of the Faith of the *competentes*, those who are preparing for Baptism. In this teaching Augustine places Mother Wisdom in the foreground. He describes her as an eternally nourishing person, who is constantly giving life. She is transforming her gifts for her “children:” the *competentes* in the early Christian church.

In this section, I will start with the context of the early Christian church, in which Augustine has placed Mother Wisdom (1). I will continue with Augustine’s text in which Mother Wisdom comes in the fore and the function given her by Augustine (2). Then I will describe how he has adopted and adapted her person to his tractate (3), the theology of Mother Wisdom (4) and the working of Mother Wisdom expressed in the symbolism of a suckling mother (5).

## 4 Context of Mother Wisdom in early Christian Church of Augustine

In this tractate, Augustine opposes the Manichean notion that spiritual insights are intended for the initiated (he was a member of this Gnostic movement for many years). He wonders whether the initiated have anything in their doctrine that they should keep hidden from “carnal” people and only communicate to spiritual persons (Io.eu.tr. 98, 1). In other words, should the mysteries of the Christian faith be made known to those who are still being led by the senses and the “flesh”? Augustine emphasizes that the mysteries of the Christian faith were not secrets only intended for initiated believers, as was the case with the Gnostics. Augustine wanted to protect his *competentes* from these (in his eyes), heretical views. For Augustine, the *competentes* must have access to the mysteries of faith. Therefore, he does not place the images “milk” and “solid food” opposite each other, but in line with each other.

Augustine places the “milk” in the context of Christian initiation. The “milk” is intended for those who are working towards initiation into the Christian faith: the *competentes*. They were prepared during Lent for the baptismal rite on Easter night. This preparation was a combination of instructions on faith and penance

that focused on conversion. In these practices, they came into contact with new values, in which they had to deal with their old lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> Catechesis also entailed the memorization of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer.

Augustine considered these as sacraments, because they enable people to encounter Jesus. The words were also internalized in such a way that they resonated with their own individual experiences and resounded in their own hearts. The love of them was experienced as grace which Augustine calls "milk." This "milk" he describes as *ubertas*: "richness" (Io.eu.tr. 98, 5).

## 5 Function of Mother Wisdom

In this section, I investigate the spiritual function of Mother Wisdom, who comes in the fore in Tractate 98, 6. In this analysis, I will use my four-point approach of spirituality. The divine reality is represented by Mother Wisdom, and the human reality by the *competentes*.

### 5.1 Augustine's text from Io.eu.tr. 98, 6

But far be it that incompatible with this milk is the food of spiritual things, which must be grasped with firm understanding, which was lacking to the Colossians and the Thessalonians and had to be supplied. For when what was lacking is supplied, what was there is not rejected. For even in the nutriments that we take, solid food is not incompatible with milk, even so much so that [solid food] itself turns into milk whereby it can be suitable for infants to whom it comes through the flesh of a mother or a nurse; so also did Mother Wisdom herself, who, although on high she is solid food of the angels, deigned, in a manner of speaking, to turn into milk for the little ones, when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. But this very man Christ who, in his true flesh, true cross, true death, true Resurrection, is called the pure milk of little ones, when he is correctly apprehended by spiritual human beings, is found to be the Lord of the angels (Io.eu.tr. 98, 6).<sup>8</sup>

### 5.2 Analysis of the Mother Wisdom in Augustine's text

At the beginning of this fragment, Augustine speaks about a supply in the faith, based on the letters of Paul (Col. 2:5<sup>9</sup> and 1 Tess. 3:10).<sup>10</sup> Augustine adapts these texts so that he can speak about lack of faith in Jesus Christ. That which is lacking in faith has to be supplemented. Thus, he pointed to the Paraclete, the Spirit of

<sup>7</sup> Miles, "Christian Baptism in the Fourth Century."

<sup>8</sup> Io.eu.tr. 98, 6 (CCL 36, 579): *Sed huic lacti absit ut sit contrarius cibus rerum spiritalium firma intellegentia capiendus, qui Colossensibus et Thessalonicensibus defuit, et supplendus, fuit. Quando enim suppletur quod defuit, non improbatur quod fuit. Nam et in ipsis quae sumimus alimentis, usque adeo non est lacti contrarius solidus cibus, ut ipse lactescat, quo possit esse aptus infantibus, ad quos per matris vel nutricis pervenit carnem; sicut fecit etiam mater ipsa sapientia, quae cum sit in excelsis angelorum solidus cibus, dignata est quodammodo lactescere parvulis, cum Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis. Sed ipse homo Christus, qui vera carne, vera cruce, vera morte, vera resurrectione sincerum lac dicitur parvulorum, cum bene ab spiritalibus capitur, invenitur Dominus angelorum.* The English translation is from: St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55–111*, 213–4.

<sup>9</sup> Io.eu.tr. 98, 5 (CCL 36, 579): *Et si corpore absens sum, spiritu vobiscum sum, gaudens et videns ordinationem vestram, et id quod deest fidei vestrae in Christo* (even if I am absent in body, in spirit I am with you, rejoicing and beholding your order and that which is lacking to your faith in Christ). Reference to Col 2:5.

<sup>10</sup> Io.eu.tr. 98,5: *nocte ac die, [...], abundantis orantes, ut videamus faciem vestram, et suppleamus quae desunt fidei vestrae* (night and day, [...] more abundantly praying that we may see your face and may supply the things that are lacking to your faith). Reference to 1 Th 3:10. Sap. 16:20–21, Vg: *pro quibus angelorum esca nutristi populum tuum, et paratum panem e caelo praestitisti illis sine labore, omne delectamentum in se habentem et omnis saporis suavitatem; substantia enim tua dulcedinem tuam quam in filios habes ostendebat et seviens uniuscuiusque voluntati ad quod quis volebat vertebatur.*

Truth, the deeper insight into Jesus Christ after his death, which is given to the perfect believers. Augustine described the Spirit of Truth as “solid food” compared to the “milk” of catecheses. However, for Augustine both “solid food” and “milk” come from Mother Wisdom.

Mother Wisdom has her residence in the highest heavens, where she feeds the angels with “solid food.” The bread of the angels is found in Wisdom of Solomon (Wisdom 16, 20–1).<sup>11</sup> It tells of God feeding his people with the food of the angels prepared in heaven. However, in Augustine’s tractate, it is not God but Mother Wisdom who feeds the angels. In turn, she reveals herself in the highest heavens as eternal nourishment. Thereby, Augustine depicts the eternal food and Mother Wisdom as the same thing. Her personification coincides with the gift she represents: Mother Wisdom is the bread in heaven, with which she satisfies the angels.

Because it is not possible for the *competentes* to comprehend this eternal food, Mother Wisdom transforms it into grace. Augustine compares this transformation with the symbolism of a lactating mother: a mother converted (*lactescere*) the food that she consumes into breast milk for her baby. With this motherly symbolism he describes the preparation of food by Mother Wisdom. This does not correspond at all with the meals that Wisdom prepares for her guests in Proverbs and Ben Sirach (Prov. 9, 4; Sir. 24, 21). In Augustine’s tractate, Mother Wisdom is only hostess for the angels in heaven, not for her “children” on earth: the *competentes*.

Mother Wisdom mediates her graces through Jesus on earth to her children on earth: the *competentes* in the early Christian church. Although mother Wisdom prepares the gifts of grace, she does not present these gifts herself. The role of hostess is taken over by Jesus. He presents her gifts of grace to her children who were working towards Christian initiation. He is her instrument. In this tractate, the relationship between Mother Wisdom and Jesus is expressed in the feeding of “milk.” Jesus represents her gift of graces, in that he is “milk.” In John’s Gospel, Jesus is the bread that came down from heaven (John 6:51), but he is not the “milk.” In Augustine’s texts, “milk” refers to grace.<sup>12</sup> Grace is prepared by Mother Wisdom and Augustine places her grace in the context of Christian initiation. Grace facilitates growth in faith so that “flesh” is transformed into “spirit,” so that the *competentes* are able to receive the Spirit of truth that leads to a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ.

### 5.3 The function of mother Wisdom in Christian initiation

In this fragment of the tractate on the Gospel of John (Io.eu.tr. 98, 6), Mother Wisdom is not the same as the Creator who bestows himself in abundant love; neither does she coincide with the incarnated Word, nor with the Holy Spirit. Instead, she has a permanent revelatory status in the highest heaven. Her revelation has to do with eternal food for the angels and with grace for the *competentes*. She is as an eternally nourishing mother, who is constantly giving life to the angels. She is related reciprocally in heaven with the angels, who open themselves to abundant nourishment. They are her heavenly disciples. Her earthly disciples are the *competentes* who open themselves to her grace mediated by Jesus Christ. He represents her divine gifts (grace) that transform their “flesh” into “spirit.” In this way, Mother Wisdom involves the *competentes* in discipleship by feeding them as an eternally nourishing Mother in Christian initiation.

## 6 Augustine’s takeover of Mother Wisdom from Sirach 24

In this section, I will investigate to what extent Augustine adopted and adapted the imagery of Ben Sira. I focus on the person of Mother Wisdom and her residence.

<sup>11</sup> Sap. 16:20–21, Vg: *pro quibus angelorum esca nutriti populum tuum, et paratum panem e caelo praestitisti illis sine labore, omne delectamentum in se habentem et omnis saporis suavitatem; substantia enim tua dulcedinem tuam quam in filios habes ostendebat et sevens uniuscuiusque voluntati ad quod quis volebat vertebatur.*

<sup>12</sup> Milk refers in Augustine’s texts to grace (*sermo* 25, 1; *sermo* 32, 7; *sermo* 335 K, 4; *en.Ps.* 143, 2).

## 6.1 Wisdom as person

The person Mother Wisdom can be found in the Latin translation of Sirach 24, 24–5. The Latin translation of Sirach 24 of Ecclesiasticus is more extensive than the Greek text in the Septuagint (LXX).<sup>13</sup> The Latin text has 47 verses, and the Greek text has 34 verses. Verse 18 from chapter 24 is in the Latin text verse 24. Here we find a completely different text about Mother Wisdom:

*Ego mater pulchrae dilectionis et timoris et agnitionis et sanctae spei (24). In me gratia omnis vitae et veritatis, in me omnis spes vitae et virtutis (25).*<sup>14</sup>

In English:

I am the mother of fair love, and of fear, and of knowledge, and of holy hope. In me is the grace of the whole life and of the truth, in me is all hope of life and of virtue.

Augustine adopts the person of Mother Wisdom from the Latin translation of Sirach 24, 24.

He does not adopt her properties – fair love (*pulchra dilectionis*), fear (*timoris*), knowledge (*agnitionis*) and holy hope (*sanctae spei*) – but rather the abstract concepts of grace and truth from verse 25:

I am the mother [...]. In me is all grace of the way and of the truth (Sir. 24:24–5).<sup>15</sup>

Grace and truth are attributed to Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John in the Latin translation of John:

For the law was given by Moses: grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17).<sup>16</sup>

However, Augustine attributes grace and truth not to Jesus Christ, but to Mother Wisdom. Augustine expresses these abstractions with Paul's imagery "milk" and "solid food" (1 Cor. 3, 2). The "milk" refers to the earthly grace obtained in relation to Jesus Christ and the "solid food" refers to the deeper understanding of Jesus Christ that is obtained after his death and resurrection. This deeper insight is given by the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13). Augustine attributes Paul's imagery of "milk" and "solid food" to Mother Wisdom.

The children for whom Mother Wisdom prepares her milk are not mentioned in the Latin text of Sirach 24:24, Vulgate. Augustine may have based this mother and child relationship instead on Luke 7:35, which describes Wisdom's relation to her children as justification:

But Wisdom is justified of all her children (Luke 7:35).<sup>17</sup>

Augustine may also have used the letters of Paul and Peter to describe the children who still need milk (1 Cor. 3:1–2). In relation to the Corinthian community, Paul describes himself as a mother who had to feed her children with "milk," intended for the "children of the faith." They had received the basic principles of the Christian faith. Likewise, in his letter Peter calls on the newborn to long for the milk so that they grow and be saved (1 Petr. 2:2).

<sup>13</sup> Sirach 24, 18: "δίδωμι δὲ σὺν πᾶσι τοῖς τέκνοις μου ἀειγνεῖς τοῖς λεγομένοις ὑπ' αὐτοῦ" (I give myself to all my children, always abiding with those whom he calls). Thiele, "Sirach, Ecclesiasticus," 694–5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 694–5. This Latin translation can be found in the Vulgate. The person mother Wisdom can also be found in the collection of the *Vetus Latina* manuscripts (Sir 24, 24): see [www.brepols.org/vetus-latina](http://www.brepols.org/vetus-latina). The *Vetus Latina* is a collective for a number of ancient translations of the Greek text into Latin, which were used in the early Christian church. Augustine preferred the Itala manuscript, the African *Vetus Latina* corrected in Northern Italy.

<sup>15</sup> Sir. 24: 24–25: *Ego mater [...] In me gratia omnis vitae et veritatis in me omnis spes vitae et virtutis.*

<sup>16</sup> John 1: 17, Vg: *quia lex per Mosen data est gratia et veritas per Iesum Christum facta est.*

<sup>17</sup> The English translation is from the *King James Bible* [the capital for Wisdom is mine].

## 6.2 The residence

In this tractate, Mother Wisdom has her residence in the highest heavens, which connects to the residence of Wisdom in Sirach: She has put up her tent in heaven (Sir. 24:4). Wisdom has no place on the earth, as is the case in Proverbs. It is told that she has built her house on her seven pillars to receive her guests (Prov. 9:1). In the Book of Ben Sira, Wisdom says that after many wanderings in heaven and on earth, she eventually finds a place to stay on Zion in Jerusalem (Sir. 24:10–1). Her wanderings refer to the way of Wisdom in the book of Enoch, in which it is said that she went out to find a place to stay among the children of men, but found no place of residence there. Therefore, she returned to her place and took her seat among the angels (1 En. 42:1–2).<sup>18</sup> She was given a place to stay in the heavens. Likewise, Augustine depicts Mother Wisdom as residing in heaven where she feeds the angels.

## 7 Theology of Mother Wisdom

Augustine links a nourishing aspect of God to Mother Wisdom. She has a permanent revelatory status in God's reality. She reveals her eternal nourishment to the angels and spiritual human beings, and transforms her eternal feeding into grace for her children, the *competentes* who were working in Christian initiation.

The transformation of eternal feeding into grace took place at the Incarnation of the Word of God, but does not coincide with it. The Incarnation is not only about the Word that becomes flesh, but also about mother Wisdom who transforms her divine nourishment into grace. With the help of the symbolism of a lactating mother, Augustine describes an Incarnation of Grace. Thus, he adds a maternal aspect to the Incarnation, which he links in symbolic language to the flesh of the mother as the place where "solid food" is transformed into "milk" for the little ones. This double Incarnation culminates in Jesus Christ: he is the Word made flesh and in him is the grace that mother Wisdom has prepared.

The relationship between mother Wisdom and Jesus comes from a wisdom tradition in which Jesus is her envoy. In the Second Testament, this tradition emerges in texts about the relationship between Jesus and Wisdom. A statement from Wisdom shows that she sent messengers and prophets (Luke:11, 49).<sup>19</sup> Traces of this tradition can also be found in Jesus' lamentation over Jerusalem in which Jesus compares himself to a broody hen who had gathered her children together (Luke 13:34 and Matt. 23:27).<sup>20</sup> When we consider Jesus to be a prophet of Wisdom, this complaint lament expresses Mother Wisdom's desire to collect her children.

These theological themes do not connect with those of Ben Sira (chapter 24), which deal instead with creation, paradise and the story of Creation.

## 8 The working of Mother Wisdom expressed in the symbolism of the suckling mother

The difference between Mother Wisdom in the Book of Ben Sira and in Augustine has to do with the symbolism of a lactating mother. With the help of this symbolism, Augustine expresses the work of

<sup>18</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, 147.

<sup>19</sup> "Therefore also said the Wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and *some* of them they shall slay and persecute" (Luke:11, 49). The English translation is from the *King James Bible*. I have adapted this translation: Wisdom instead of the Wisdom. This tradition can also be found in Matt: 23:34. See also: Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 134–5.

<sup>20</sup> "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not!" (Matt. 23:37). The English translation is from the *King James Bible*.

Mother Wisdom. We also find the symbolism of a suckling mother in other texts by Augustine, especially in his explanations of psalms and in sermons. Augustine attributes this symbolism to Wisdom (Io.eu.tr. 98, 6; en.Ps. 33, s. 1, 6), and in line with her, to Christ (en.Ps. 30, 2, s. 1, 9; en.Ps. 119, 2; s. 117, 16; s. 335K, 4).<sup>21</sup>

The frequent use of this symbolism in his works raises the question of its purpose. It seems that elements from at least three contexts influenced Augustine's use of symbolism: the historical-cultural context (1), the autobiographical context (2) and theological context (3).<sup>22</sup>

## 8.1 Historical-cultural context

The iconography of the lactating mother goddess Isis was widespread in the Roman Empire.<sup>23</sup> The worship of Isis continued throughout the third and fourth centuries, despite the growing influence of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Augustine was likely familiar with it. It could be that he was affected by the presentation of the milk feeding goddess-mother from the cultural context in which he lived.

Isis was the mother of Horus, who – after the death of her husband Osiris – in a special way was conceived. In the iconographic representation, she is pictured as feeding her son Horus on her breast (*Isis lactans*).<sup>25</sup> The Isis cult was still prevalent in North Africa, which in Augustine's time was a province of the Roman Empire. So, Apuleius of Madaura (ca. 125–ca. 180) says in his novel *Metamorphoses* (150) over a certain Lucius who was turned into a donkey and regains his human form at his initiation into the mysteries of Isis. Augustine heard of Apuleius, for he wrote about Apuleius and about his work *The Golden Ass* in *The City of God* (ciu. 18, 18). Moreover, Augustine attended high school (secondary education) in the university town Madaura, which boasted to be the birthplace of the Platonist orator Apuleius.<sup>26</sup> But the symbolism of the suckling mother does not appear in *The Golden Ass*.

## 8.2 Theological context

Another context which may have influenced Augustine is the theological context of North Africa. The image of a church that her “children” feeds on spiritual nourishment (“milk”) we see in St. Clement of Alexandria. The motherly imagery also appeared among African spiritual authors like Tertullian and St. Cyprian.<sup>27</sup> Tertullian (ca. 160–222) personifies the church as a mother who feeds the faithful on her mother's breasts. In his work *Ad Martyras*, he shows a deep respect for her which he expresses in the words: *Domina Mater Ecclesia* (Lady Mother Church).<sup>28</sup> St. Cyprian (205–58), who was bishop of the North African Church province of Carthage, where Augustine would study later, writes about the Christian parents: God as Father and the church as a mother. Using the motherly symbolism, he stressed the unity of the church:

<sup>21</sup> Bouwman, *Mater Sapientia*, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Bouwman, “Wisdom Christology in the Works of St. Augustine,” 607–20.

<sup>23</sup> Many sanctuaries were awarded to Isis in Egypt, but also in Greece and Italy. Haase, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.

<sup>24</sup> Obbink, *Cybele, Isis, Mithras*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Tran Tam Tinh, *Isis Lactans*.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*.

<sup>28</sup> Ad Mart. 1:1.3 (CSEL 76, 1): *Inter carnis alimenta, benedicti martyres designati, quae vobis et domina mater ecclesia de uberibus suis proprii et singuli fratres de opibus suis in carcerem subministrant, capite aliquid et a nobis, quod faciat ad spiritum quoque educandum.*



There is only one head and only one source, only one Mother abounding in the issue of her fruitfulness. By her bearing are we born, by her milk are we nourished, by her are we animated.<sup>29</sup>

The authors of these texts ascribe the symbolism of motherhood to the church, but Augustine links this motherly symbolism to both Wisdom and the church.

### 8.3 Autobiographical context

It is possible that the symbolism of the nursing mother has an autobiographic context, because of the repetition of this symbolism. In his Confessions, Augustine describes that his mother Monnica played a role of huge importance in his religious development. We also know that Augustine had a lasting relationship with a woman for fourteen years, with whom he had a son. He had experienced his partner's motherhood from close up. Given their loving bond as partners and parents, traces of her daily mothering can be seen throughout the Confessions, in which he tells the story of his life. Implicitly, the symbolism appears where Augustine describes himself as a baby who has been nursed by his mother and his nurses, events which he was unable to personally remember as an adult (Conf. 1.6.7). It is possible that he remembered the nursing of his son by his partner, whereby he was a partaker of the intimate intercourse between mother and son.<sup>30</sup> However, in the Confessions, Augustine did not render her motherhood explicit, due to associations with sexuality and sin (Conf. 3.4.5; 4.2.2).

In summary, the three contextual elements may have influenced Augustine and encouraged him to use the symbolism of the lactating mother. The most personal of these elements may have been the experience of his mistress nursing their son. This means that this symbolism is associated with gender, because cultural and social factors have played a role in the construction of the symbolism of motherhood. The social factors point especially to the mistress of Augustine whose motherhood he experienced from close up. The iconography of Isis *lactans* may have inspired the expression of the symbolism of the lactating mother, but in Augustine's writings we find no explicit reference to her. Finally, it is evident that the writings of the Church Fathers have contributed to the theological content of this symbolism of motherhood in Augustine. It should be noted that they attribute this symbolism to the church, but not to Mother Wisdom as Augustine did.

## 9 Conclusion: The influence of Mother Wisdom on Augustine

Augustine adopted and adapted the person Mother Wisdom from the Vulgate text of Sirach 24, 24 and placed her person in the context of the early Christian church. He picked up the metaphor of motherhood and used it in his own way. He did not adopt her qualities, but her abstractions: grace and truth. He described her function as an eternally nourishing mother, who continuously gives life. He compared her work to that of a suckling mother that transformed the *competentes* from grace ("milk") to truth ("solid food").

By comparing the work of Mother Wisdom with a suckling mother, he opposed the Manicheans, for whom spiritual insights were only intended for the initiated. With this symbolism he placed truth ("solid food") and grace ("milk") in line with each other and not as opposites. In doing so, he emphasized that the mysteries of faith were accessible to the *competentes*.

<sup>29</sup> De Eccl. Unit. 5: *unum [...] caput est et origo una, et una mater secunditatis successibus copiosa: illius fetunascitur, illius nutrimur, spiritu eius animator*. Cyprien de Carthage, *L'unité de l'église = De ecclesiae catholicae unitate*, 186–7.

<sup>30</sup> Bouwman, "Spiritual Motherhood of Monnica." 49–69.

Augustine also did not depend theologically on central concepts from Ben Sira's imagery. Augustine adapted the material imagery of Wisdom from Ben Sira towards a more inclusive reality of God that encompasses divine motherhood. Augustine also added the element of the incarnation, who mediates Wisdom's grace through the Jesus of Nazareth. In doing so, Augustine sheds new light on the one-sidedness of the Christian tradition that has emphasized the incarnation of the Word and Jesus of Nazareth over the centuries. The relation between Mother Wisdom and Jesus of Nazareth points to a wisdom tradition in which Jesus is her envoy. In this relationship, Jesus has come to the fore and become visible as host, while mother wisdom has faded into the background as eternally nourishing but invisible as a hostess.

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